

Testimony of Amy Eppler-Epstein
Staff Attorney, New Haven Legal Assistance Assoc.
Board member, Columbus House
In support of Funding for Affordable Housing and Homelessness Services and Prevention
Appropriations Hearing
February 16, 2022

My name is Amy Eppler-Epstein, and I am testifying today wearing two hats: as an attorney in the housing unit at New Haven Legal Assistance, and as a board member of Columbus House, which provides emergency shelter and homelessness prevention services in New Haven and beyond. I urge the Committee to support proposals and expansions of the Governor's budget for the Department of Housing, that will:

- Increase funding of affordable housing, by providing the funds to increase the number of available Rental Assistance Program (RAP) certificates, and allocating American Rescue Plan funds to create additional affordable housing units.
- Reinstatement of funds for security deposit guarantees, and rent bank eviction prevention funds, that can help tenants facing eviction or needing to move to keep their housing or find other housing.
- Increase funds in the DOH and DMHAS budgets to provide homeless and housing service organizations funding for adequate wages, benefits, and professional development for front line workers.

One of the fundamental lessons learned during these almost two years of pandemic living, is the importance of housing. We have seen how housing is not just critically important for individuals and families, to maintain their own health and safety; but also how housing is intimately tied to societal and public health.

As a legal aid attorney, I am seeing more and more families struggling with meeting their rental obligations; and having increasing difficulty in locating affordable places to live. It seems like the vacancy rates are very low; and the rental housing prices keep going up and up. My clients who want to move are having a hard, and often impossible time finding apartments that are available; and those that are for rent, are not affordable, often with rental rates that exceed the income of tenants who are working full time minimum wage jobs. Our clients at NHLAA are facing a housing crisis, that is about to get significantly worse as the federally funded Unite CT rental assistance program comes to an end.

I support an increase to DOH's Housing/Homeless Services line by at least \$20 million in FY23 to expand the Rental Assistance Program (RAP). This is a minimum of what is needed; RAP subsidies are one good and efficient way to make more rental housing units more affordable.

I also support generous and broadly available security deposit guarantee funds, and rent bank assistance. These programs have not been funded in the past two years, but are especially needed now with the ending of Unite CT. Rent bank funds can help resolve eviction cases and keep tenants in their housing. Security deposits similarly can prevent homelessness by enabling people to move when they find new housing. Both are crucial homelessness prevention tools, that maintain housing stability.

Another way is through the construction of additional affordable housing. I support the use of American Rescue Plan funds towards this end, and ask that such units should be geared towards the *lowest* income tenants in our communities (*less than 30%* of AMI).

As a board member of Columbus House, I have seen the critically important work of front line personnel, as they worked to keep homeless people safe and sheltered during the pandemic, and struggled to help them find permanent housing placements. It is the quality of the caseworkers, and the relationships that they build with their clients, that makes all the difference in helping homeless people; and the caseworkers I have known and worked with at Columbus House have been magnificent! I have seen first hand, from clients I have referred there, that these caseworkers have been able to assist hard to house people, with many mental health and other challenges, and enable them to find and keep permanent housing. But they are woefully underpaid, and Columbus House has struggled with staff retention and turn over. As a board member, I therefore am also here today to support providing an additional \$13.34 million in FY 23 (\$8.08 million at DOH and \$5.26 million at DMHAS) to provide homeless and housing service organizations the funding they need to provide adequate wages and benefits for their front line workers.

Thank you for your consideration, and for ensuring that we prioritize the creation of affordable housing, for the lowest income members of our communities; and the provision of services and supports to combat and prevent homelessness.